DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SEA OTTER RESEARCH AIMED AT OIL SPILLS

A research permit for a three-year study of sea otters in Alaskan waters has been requested by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Marine Mammal Protection Act to study the expanding population of these mammals in Prince William Sound, where the Trans-Alaska Pipeline will terminate and load oil onto ships.

The study will provide valuable knowledge of the animals and their habitat requirements before the area's ecology is disturbed by pipeline-associated activities. Moreover, the assembly of basic information should allow the effects of any possible future oil spills in these waters to be properly evaluated and countered.

Public comments are invited on this permit application. Remarks should be addressed to Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Law Enforcement Division, Washington, D.C. 20240. Comments received through October 16, 1974, will be considered.

Biologists propose to take dead specimens found in the wild for surveys of age, sex, morphology, and seasonal distribution of mortality. The specimens will be preserved and retained for several years.

Also, it is proposed that, in the first two years of the study, up to ten sea otters a year will be captured with nets and held in captivity for up to three months in floating pens so tests for marking the animals and attaching radio transmitters can be conducted. Marking tests will use disk tags, neck bands, and bleaching. When the best method of marking has been determined it is further proposed that up to 30 otters a year will be captured, marked, and released.

The sea otter's range is limited to the northern waters of the Pacific Ocean. In North American waters they are found from central California north to Alaska's Prince William Sound. A 1973 census of Alaskan waters estimated their population to be on the order of 100,000 to 120,000.

Sea otters are actually members of the weasel family and are related to mink and land otters rather than to seals, sea lions, and walruses. They have webbed hind feet for swimming and deft foretoes for handling food. Unlike seals, which rely on a heavy layer of blubber for insulation in the cold waters of the northern Pacific, the sea otter must depend upon air trapped in its fine, dense fur to maintain its body temperature. Hence, these animals are extremely vulnerable to oil spills.

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